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Volunteers Step Up on Law Day

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On Law Day, lawyers throughout the nation are going back to school.

They're going into classrooms to help students understand and appreciate fundamental American values. A new "Dialogue on Freedom" Web site -- www.dialogueonfreedom.org -- is giving lawyers the tools to conduct robust discussions with students. The hope is that young people will come to understand that we can maintain the freedoms that are rooted in our nation's very soul while ensuring the safety of our citizens. Even within the new and frightening landscape of the post-Sept. 11 world, the familiar landmarks of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights can -- indeed, must -- guide us.

This major initiative, conceived by Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, is the American Bar Association's principal Law Day outreach this year. I salute the men and women of the legal profession who are donating their time, skills and experience to enhance public understanding of and respect for the rule of law that defines our democracy and protects our freedoms.

Another kind of attorney volunteerism deserves a salute on this Law Day -- the tireless pro bono efforts of lawyers, whereby attorneys take no fee for legal work that enables people of limited means to get the help they need.

Over the entrance to the U.S. Supreme Court are carved the words "Equal Justice Under Law." These words represent both a reality and an aspiration. A reality in that America's courts are open to everyone, and even the least powerful can seek justice, against the mightiest opponents. But the words are also an aspiration, because many Americans can't afford legal services, and so are unable to take full advantage of our great legal system. The American Bar Association and state and local bar associations have worked tirelessly to bring legal services to more and more people. In keeping with those efforts, "Assuring Equal Justice for All" is the theme of Law Day this year.

I first became involved in the work of the ABA when I was appointed to the Standing Committee on Lawyers' Public Service Responsibility. A substantial focus of our work then and now was encouraging lawyers to donate their services pro bono publico -- "for the good of the public." At that time, barely 20 years ago:

- The organized bar did not have an infrastructure to supply volunteer lawyers to meet the legal needs of the poor.

- Bar-sponsored pro bono programs -- where they did exist -- were mostly local and mainly urban, with volunteer lawyers representing a fairly narrow slice of the legal community.

Our profession, however, did not sit idly by. We organized. Working together, the ABA and the National Legal Aid and Defender Association created a new system of legal services, linking pro bono programs with local legal service programs to serve the needs of this nation's low-income population.

The most tangible evidence of this effort was the development of bar-sponsored pro bono programs in every state, in every sizable metropolitan area, and in many rural areas as well.

The success of these programs is undeniable. We have not simply changed a profession; we have changed lives.

We have improved the lives of children -- by resolving complicated and hostile family disputes, by facilitating adoptions and custody agreements, and by helping children find the comfort, the certainty and the safety of home and family.

We have improved the lives of the elderly -- by protecting our senior citizens from unscrupulous business persons and by giving the older generation financial security and comfort through voluntary estate planning.

We have improved the lives of tens of thousands of women -- by assuring that those who are victims of domestic violence can seek orders of protection, divorces and child support, so they can leave dangerous situations and raise their children in an environment where fear is not a constant companion.

But more remains to be done. Even today, we estimate that only 20 percent of the legal needs of the poor are met through legal aid and pro bono. I call on lawyers everywhere to share in the highest aspirations of our profession, and to help realize our unwavering, unyielding commitment to the 200-year-old promise of equal justice under law for everyone.